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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000859

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/23/2019  
TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR TS  
SUBJECT: BEN ALI ILLNESS PROMPTS CANCELLATION OF SPANISH  
ROYAL VISIT

REF: TUNIS 849

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) TAP, Tunisia's official press agency, announced on the morning of November 23 that President Ben Ali was suffering from a throat infection and that his doctors had ordered five days of rest. The Spanish Embassy confirmed to us later on November 23 that the visit of King Juan Carlos, who was supposed to arrive in Tunis on November 24 for a state visit, had been indefinitely postponed.

¶2. (C) Ben Ali has made a number of public appearances recently: On November 22, he watered a newly planted olive tree in a ceremony marking Tunisia's Arbor Day. Last week, he participated in the World Summit on Food Security in Rome and then presided at a credentialing ceremony for new Ambassadors on November 19. At that event, as reported reftel, we had the opportunity to view the President at close range and he appeared (to our non-medically trained eyes) generally healthy.

¶3. (C) Comment: We expect the announcement of the illness, and the cancellation of the royal visit, will put the rumor mills, which are constantly preoccupied with (usually ill sourced and dramatic) stories of the president's health, into overdrive. End comment.

GRAY